Special from Israel

I. F. Stone's First Report Direct From Beleaguered Jerusalem

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War May Come At Any Time

Jerusalem

I have been here one week and in that week the situation has deteriorated with frightful rapidity. Writing for air mail, a week ahead of press time, is harrowing because by the time this appears in print war may easily engulf Israel. Hammarskjold has just passed through here and in his wake there are rumors that Egypt will attack once his mission is over. But these opening lines reflect the situation as it appears from outside. Within Israel, the atmosphere is quite unlike the picture evoked by the headlines one reads in the American and European papers over one's coffee on a sunny hotel terrace in Jerusalem, even though the terrace be within sight and gun range of the enemy across the way on the medieval battlements of the Old City.

The main impression here is of tremendous expansion and vitality. Everywhere the country is booming. The growth since I was here last in the Fall of 1950 is enormous. Though war is uppermost in the minds of the top leaders with whom one speaks, it seems to figure in the minds of the rest of the population only as a possibility so familiar as to be discounted. In the buses, taxis, streets, shops, hotels and settlements the atmosphere is one of complete absorption in the tasks of reconstruction and development. Since 1945, I have been here seven times but never has this ancient land seemed more the new frontier. As compared with 1950 and its ill fed "austerity," morale is high. The people, even those poorly dressed, seem well-fed and look healthy. The youth in and out of uniform are blooming, and the influx of Oriental Jews—with their lush dark-eyed women—has considerably raised the level of feminine beauty. To walk the streets and travel the roads of Israel is to feel the intensity of a subway rush in Times Square. Everywhere there are new buildings, new projects, new enterprises, new commodities, new pipelines, new roads, new towers. Remembering the tiny trickle of the pious and the Quixotic from which this community has grown in little more than half a century, it is not hard to understand why the Arabs are afraid. From the days of Mohammed to those of the Turkish adventurers who took over Egypt, the passive millions of the Near East have been subjugated over and over again by a dynamic handful. Two decades of peace, and Israel—for all its seeming tininess on the map—may easily dominate this whole area. This is not a part of the world in which numbers count.

Attack Taken for Granted

Amid all the clashing diversity of opinion to be encountered in so individualistic a community as this, one observation may be made with assurance. Israel is not afraid of a Second Round. The preventive war spirit of six months ago has died down but left behind a tendency to take for granted a renewed attack by the Arab States when they are ready. Ben Gurion, in this as in so many respects typical, is almost cockily ready to take the Arabs on at any time. Indeed one foreign notable after a session with the top leadership described the tone as being like that of the Russians on the eve of 1905, a most unhappy parallel. Israelis generally feel sure that they will win, though they expect the cost to be heavy. Only a minority would welcome war; the majority, Ben Gurion included, prefer peace but will not accept a Munich as its price.

It would not be accurate to say that in the meantime Israel is going about its business. It is *rushing* about its business. It is not even bitter anymore about America's lopsided arms embargo or the UN's innocuous maneuverings. It takes for granted that it stands alone; that both Russia and America are playing for the oil-rich Arabs; that Nehru too woos them as does Tito; that France is afraid to be too friendly, that Burma seems to be its one staunch friend. In all the impossible history of Israel, never has its position seemed more impossible, more hopeless, than now. But a people who have gone through so much against such odds before are understandably confident. To an Israeli none of this seems really new. The *fedayeen* beginning to creep across the Gaza border recall the Arab terrorists of the late 1930's. The world political picture does not seem so different from the days before 1947 when both Communist and capitalist world powers were anti-Zionist. The big difference in Israeli eyes does not lie in the Soviet jets which Egypt may now fly but in the fact of Statehood; at least the enemy is outside, and the government within is not in alien hands. There is an Army, a government, a State, a people, a familiarity with overwhelmingly unfavorable odds, and that same weapon which was Israel's secret in 1948, *ein brera, no alternative* but to fight if fight it must. This may explain why people here seem to the visitor so strangely unafraid, almost unconcerned.

II

When I landed at Lydda airport just after midnight a week ago all seemed at peace, but there were already signs that the appearances were deceptive. The airport was no longer the armed camp it appeared to be in those last years under the British when the CID (the British FBI, the Criminal Investigation Division) watched all visitors. A crowd was waiting on the darkened roof of the airport and orange juice was served us in the waiting room. The movement through passport, customs and currency control was swift and efficient; it was shocking to learn that the Israel pound, once the same as Britain's, was now worth only about 55 cents. A taxi driver on the steps seeing my telltale typewriter case wanted to know why we newspapermen were frightening away the tourist trade by writing about war. "You will see for yourself all is peaceful here," he told me. But the one-sided distribution of the in-

(Continued on Page Two)

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A Capital That Lives Within Gunshot of The Enemy . . .

(Continued from Page One)

coming visitors and their friends indicated misgivings. The bus for Tel Aviv was jammed to capacity with new arrivals and the friends and relatives who had been waiting to greet them. But in the lone taxi which set off for Jerusalem there were only two other passengers besides myself, an elderly German Jewish couple back from a visit to their son, a lawyer in Nairobi. The capital of Israel is the only capital in the world which is surrounded on three sides by enemy territory. Its location, high in the Judean mountains at the end of a long finger of territory extending into Jordan, chills the ardor of the tourist.

Up Into The Clouds

It was a wonderful ride. Outside the airport the familiar desert palm and eucalyptus smell of Israel sent chills of delight up the spine of the returning traveller. To our right, as we sped away from Lydda we could see in the distance the dim lights of Ramle, the capital of Arab Palestine from the Eighth to the Eleventh centuries. As we turned eastward, further on along our left was a huge cement factory sprawled across the plain, fully lit, working night and day. Beyond this we skirted round Arab-held Latrun, the British police fortress, where only nine years ago most of the men now governing Israel were interned by the British in a final ineffective try at a tough policy. Further on a string of lights circled a colony almost on the Jordan frontier; the lights, our driver explained, were necessary to keep watch against infiltrators. At Bab-el-Wad, the cleft in the mountains where the road to Jerusalem begins its upward climb from the plain, we sped past an all-night Shell service station, a banal note at a spot of heroic struggle between Jew and Arab in 1948. From then on all was dark except for the occasional lights of the pumping stations along the pipeline which carries water to Jerusalem. The air grew chill as we climbed higher. In the starlight the craggy treeless mountain tops looked like sleeping pachyderms. We did not pass or meet a single car. It began to drizzle and soon we were winding upward through low hanging clouds.

We talked as we rode. The elderly couple had lived in Jerusalem since 1934, the year they left Germany. The husband had been a bookbinder in Nuremberg and carried on the same business in Israel. Their son was doing well in Kenya; they were impressed with the rich soil and business opportunities of the East African colony; the Mau Mau were surrendering. They had three grandchildren in Kenya. Our driver was Jerusalem born, a *sabra* and once—like so many taxi drivers—a member of the terrorist organization, the Irgun. He was, as might have been expected, a passionate nationalist. Was he afraid of war with Egypt now that Egypt had new Soviet jet planes? The planes did not impress him, "It's the spirit that counts," he said, "not the arms." He didn't want to see peace. If there were peace, he said, we would never recover the Old City. When I asked him why it was so important to take the Old City, he said I asked strange questions. Suppose, he asked in turn, my brother were in the hands of the enemy? Would I not try to free him? The Old City was part of our flesh and blood, he said in Yiddish. We must recover it. The Beth Hamigdash (the Temple) site was in the Old City. That seemed to him conclusive. I asked him whether he was religious and he said no. His emotional feeling about the Old City was purely nationalist, and I had reason to believe it was not exceptional. I was to hear another Jerusalem resident, a moderate man, born and educated in the West, say it cut him like a knife to see streets walled off within the city between the Jewish and Arab held portions. The Greeks in their ancient City States must have felt the way the Israeli of Jerusalem feel about their city. For all I know the Jerusalem Arabs may feel the same way; there were rich and cultivated families in the Arab sections outside the Old City which were taken over by the Jews.

Tea On A "Brink"

We drove past the high promontory of Castel where so many died in 1948 to hold command of the road and further on the driver pointed out in a valley along the way the dim ruins of the Arab village of Lifta, famous for its thieves and brigands. The dark and sleeping city into which we finally drove after two was at peace. But the first thing we saw in the morning from our bedroom balcony in the beautiful King David Hotel was part of Jerusalem's No Man's Land, at that point a narrow stretch of green grassy valley rising upward to the Old City walls high on the hill across the way. The King David is probably the only luxury hotel in the world whose guests sleep and eat within range of walls manned by enemy guns. Nobody having tea in the sun on the broad terrace seems to realize how much depends on the restraint and discipline of enemy gunners hidden on the walls just across the valley.

On its north, east and south, Jerusalem works, plays, eats and sleeps within range of enemy firepower. Only eight years ago mortar and artillery shells from these surrounding hills rained down on Jewish Jerusalem. People dodged from doorway to doorway on their way to work; hardly a house was left undamaged. Water was strictly rationed and food had to be carried by volunteers at night over secret footpaths around Bab-el-Wad. Gershon Agron, an American newspaperman who came here with the Jewish Legion in the British Army in 1917, managed to keep his paper, the Jerusalem Post, going all through that siege. Last year he was elected Mayor of Jerusalem. When I walked in on him my first morning in Jerusalem to find him behind a desk piled high with English and Hebrew monographs on municipal government and finance, he had just had a visit from an editor of the Catholic Digest named McCarthy. "Why you son-of-a-gun," said McCarthy, "don't you remember me? We used to cover police headquarters together in Philadelphia 40 years ago and you stole some of my best stories!" Mayor Agron's first words when we began to talk were of the overhanging threat. "If only it weren't for the war," he said, his very phrasing implying its inevitability, "how easy our problems would be. In three years we could settle them all. Instead of rebuilding and expansion; I have to worry about air raid shelters." Yet he spoke with zest rather than resignation.

Laundry in No Man's Land

On the very border itself, all seems to be taken for granted. Chickens peck hopefully between the ruins in the Musrara

(Continued on Page Three)

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. . . Homes and Even A Synagogue in The Ruins Left In 1948

quarter, barefoot children play amid the grass and flowers of No Man's Land, the slender cypresses wave in the wind and the sign in Hebrew and Arabic, "Danger. Enemy Territory in Front of You. Forbidden to Cross" holds up one end of a clothesline on which a fresh wash dangles in the breeze. Small boys play ball along the border but a passerby shouted angrily in Arabic when we got up on a pile of debris to have a closer look at the enemy positions across the way. No soldiers are visible on either side. Birds sing in the chill spring air, and the weeds have grown lustily in the ruins on both sides. At Mandelbaum Gate, the one point where it is still possible to pass between Israeli and Arab Jerusalem, we saw the fortnightly convoy come down from the Hebrew University and Hadassah Hospital on Mt. Scopus in enemy territory. A Jordanian soldier in a *khaffiyeh* checked passes on the other side and UN observers watched the armored cars pass over into Israel. The armistice agreement permits Israel this Operation Caretaker. Pilgrims also pass through this gate and we saw a group of Finns who had just come from Jordan waiting on the Israel side. Their army bags bore hotel tags from Valencia in Spain. They seemed unable to speak anything but Finnish and waited helplessly near the frontier post for a guide to arrive. Nearby, facing Jordan from the Israel side, was a large sign in blue and white saying in Hebrew, "Welcome Within Thy Gates O Jerusalem!"

On the north and east the city's streets run into No Man's Land but on the south, high on a hill facing toward Bethlehem, is the country's most fought over *kibbutz,* Ramat Rahel (Rachel's Heights), a fortress settlement which I saw last in 1948 the morning of the first truce when unburied corpses still lay like blackened leather caricatures of men amid the rubble and the barbed wire. Founded in 1926, the colony has been twice destroyed, once in the Arab riots of 1929 and again in the Arab-Jewish war in 1948. It changed hands four times in 1948 but was in the hands of Israel again when the armistice came. Ramat Rahel dominates the one way into Jerusalem from the south, the road from Bethlehem which may be seen across the green rolling hills in the distance. Reconstruction began in 1949 and there is still much to be done. In the ruined laundry, still torn open to the blue sky above, a 12 foot boiler stands like a rusty Moloch in the wreckage. In the cellar below one can see where mortar shells finally tore up the secret storeroom in which the Haganah once hid its arms from the British.

Sheep Will Wander

In a huge communal stone building, part still under repair, part rebuilt, we visited the secretary of the *kibbutz,* Joel Nathan, in his small bare whitewashed office. Nathan was a Polish *yeshivah bocher* (theological seminary student) who emigrated to Palestine 18 years ago. He said the colony lost 12 members in the 1948 war, nine at the *kibbutz* itself and three in battle elsewhere. Ramat Rahel plans to concentrate on vineyards, orchards and cattle raising. It has 50 head of Holland cattle and 5,000 laying hens. Nathan explained that ordinarily they would also raise sheep but they were too close to the frontier. "There is no way," he said in Yiddish, "to keep sheep from wandering into enemy territory." The colony's pride is the war memorial which now stands in its central square, a statue of Rachel protecting her children with the Hebrew inscription from Jeremiah, "Thy children shall come again to their own border."

From Ramat Rahel we went to Jewish Jerusalem's oldest Holy Place, King David's tomb on Mt. Zion. From a valley under the walls of the Old City one climbs endless stairs with barbed wire on one side of them to mark the frontier, and then one descends deep into a dark cavern. Two Israeli soldiers, the first we had seen, stand on guard at the entrance. Within, lit by candles, is the tomb. On it are crowns from ancient Torahs and over them a banner which reads in Hebrew, "David King of Israel Lives Forever." A sturdy bearded Rabbi caretaker said that 14 kings of David's line were buried in the tomb and invited the visitor to light a candle and have a prayer said for a departed parent.

The Venerable and The Horrible

In a nearby cavern is a newer exhibit, the hideous relics of the Nazi concentration camps and crematoria, torn and defiled Torahs, objects made of skin, human soap. Not far away within the same ancient cellars one may see where the Haganah managed to blast a way through the thick walls into the adjoining Old City during the war. Above all these relics, venerable and horrible, of human struggle one emerges again into a sunny garden and the peaceful mountains across the deep cleft of the Jordan valley looked pink and diaphanous in the declining sun like a huge setting for a Wagnerian Gotterdammerung. Church bells began to ring from the Dormition Monastery on Mt. Zion for evening prayer.

My strangest visit on the Jerusalem border occurred several days later on the eve of the Sabbath when I wandered into the back street slums only a few blocks from the opulent King David Hotel. Attracted by ruins I walked down Eliahu Shama street to the walled off dead end directly on the frontier. Adjoining the new 20-foot high frontier wall was a four story house of which the front half had been completely destroyed. The stairs were still there and led up to rooms of which one wall and a major part of the flooring had been torn away. These half rooms open to the street and sky were occupied. The street was full of Oriental Jewish children playing and my questions in bad Hebrew created a hilarious uproar. One bright-eyed urchin in response to a question said there were 33 families living in that ruined house.

Homes On A Ruined Rooftop

I was incredulous and asked whether anyone there spoke English. Bright Eyes motioned me to follow him. He led me into an adjoining house and up three flights of stairs to the apartment of a Bulgarian Jew named Avigor who turned out to speak French and German, and was kind enough (after I had had coffee and cake) to take me on a tour of the ruined house. The house, he said, was that of a wealthy Arab named Tannous now in America. He said it was blown up one night by the Irgun while officers of the Arab Legion were meeting there. The tour of inspection started on the roof where two paperboard dwellings had been built near the precarious sheared off edges of the roof. In one lived a Jew from Tangiers with his wife and baby; he was now a member of the Jeru-

(Continued on Page Four)

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The World's Oldest Continuous Government Prepares for Invasion

(Continued from Page Three)

salem police force. In the other lived a Yugoslav Jew from Zagreb who had been an ironworker in his native country. Here, like so many in this poor quarter, he answered "kvish" when asked where he worked—i.e. he worked on the roads. He and his wife occupied the one room on the roof.

The Bulgarian, a hatmaker whose son will graduate as a lawyer from Hebrew University in two months, belonged to the wealthier section of the slum; he himself had three rooms. He has a family of seven and arrived in Israel May 15, 1948, the very day Statehood was declared. He proudly showed me the family furniture he had brought with him from Bulgaria. When we descended from the roof and entered the house of Tannous from the street we found a whole catacomb of one room apartments within it. Plumbing was of the most makeshift variety. At one point there was a huge can stuck in a shell hole in the wall. A pipe had been let down from above with a spigot and this supplied water to the occupants.

Invincible Housewives

The house was entirely occupied by Jews from Persian Kurdistan and the housewives standing in front of their doors politely invited us to step in and see their homes. The surprise was to see the spotless cleanliness of the rooms in this abandoned house. The old discolored stone floors had been scrubbed clean. The beds were made; the tables set. The Sabbath candles had been lit and wine and fruit were on the table. I had to accept something to eat or be guilty of discourtesy.

Higher up, on the top floor, the biggest surprise of all awaited me. Here, shoes piled up outside as before a mosque, there was a synagogue, known simply as the Congregation of Tannous' house. In an alcove the women prayed. The main portion of the synagogue was packed with dark-skinned worshippers, unmistakably Jewish in feature, bright-eyed and shy. Evening prayers had begun. Out the broken windows on one side the Old City wall seemed quite close across the rubble of No Man's Land; out the windows on the other side one could hear the children singing at play in the darkening street below.

III

In this beleaguered capital with its vivid contrasts of poverty and luxury, its slums and its tree-shaded residential areas, its Oriental beggars and its well-stocked bookshops, there sits the oldest continuous government in the world. The three concentric circles of the Government of Israel, the Jewish Agency and the Histadruth (Labor Federation) are headed by the same characters who have governed the *Yishuv* since the Balfour Declaration and in some cases even before. Ben Gurion, Moshe Sharrett, Goldie Meyerson, Levi Eshkol and the lesser figures around them make up the well known cast of the most solidly entrenched bureaucracy in the world, devoted, energetic, personally incorruptible, and tenacious in the firm grasp of power. The coalitions shift but the center of power remains with the *Mapai,* the right wing of Socialists who control the Labor Federation and through it most of the institutions of this country. This is a kind of "collective leadership," a maze of interlocking bureaucratic "empires" in which even those at the top must tread warily in the effort to get things done. Foreign experts, particularly American Jews, find the maze both maddening and miraculous—maddening because of its crustacean-like capacity to resist new ideas, miraculous in the results which seem to flow from it nonetheless almost despite itself. As in an army, to talk with those within it is to hear an endless story of frustration and snafu; to watch it from outside and at a distance is to see what appears to be a machine streamlined for victorious achievement.

Nowhere else on earth are people still ruled by the same men who governed them in 1920. It is as if Woodrow Wilson still ran the government in the United States and Lloyd George in Britain.

At the moment its interest and energies are concentrated on preparation for what it believes to be almost inevitable war. But away from the capital and its top figures, energy is still concentrated on reconstruction and development. Only in the last few days have the minds of ordinary men turned toward war as an imminent possibility. But of the development I have seen and of the shootings in the Gaza strip and of the *fedayeen* terror which threatens I must write next week.

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